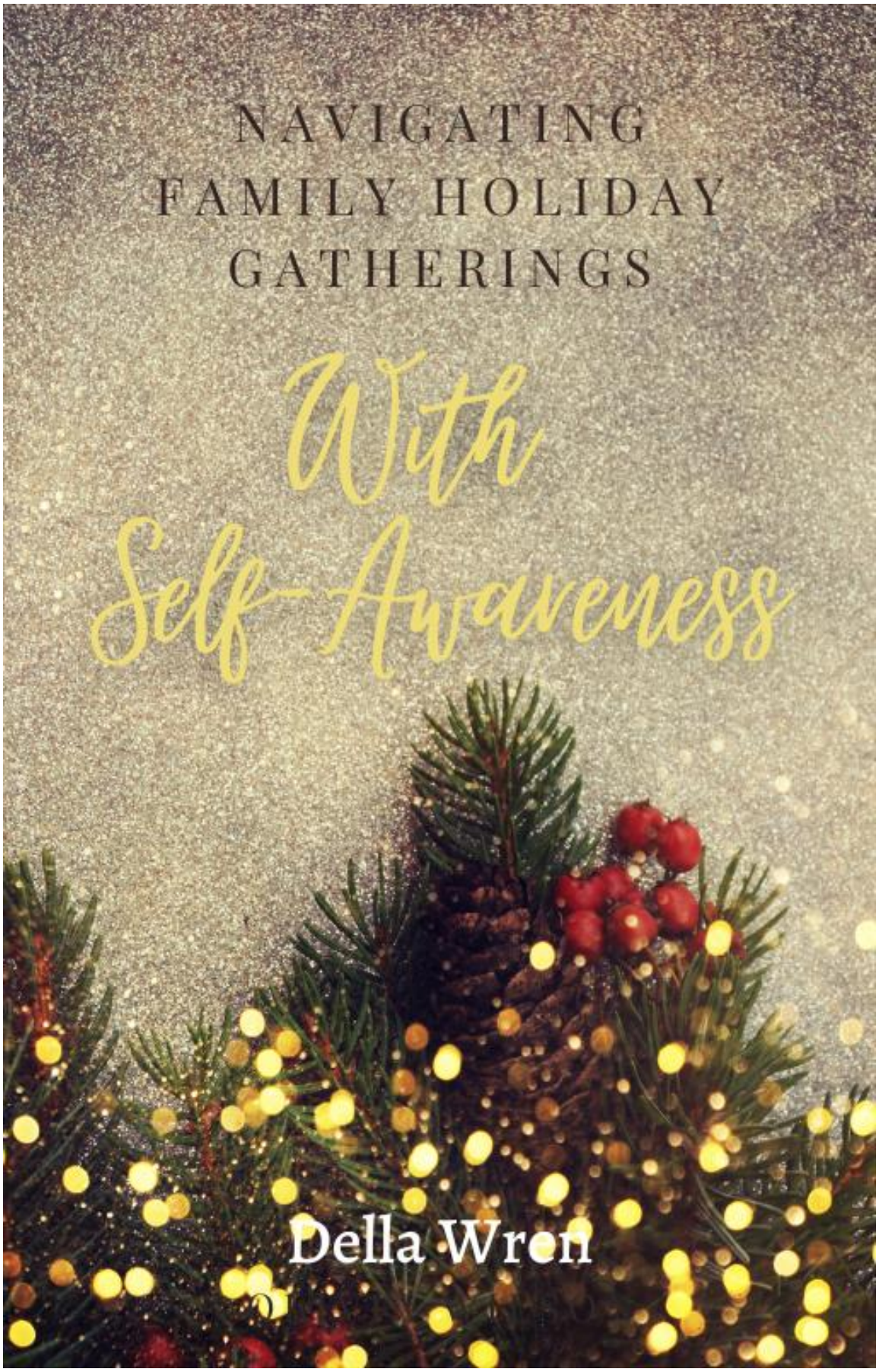
NAVIGATING
FAMILY HOLIDAY
GATHERINGS
With
Self-Awareness
Della Wren

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Navigating Family Holiday Gatherings – With Self-Awareness

Okay, who needs this? Be honest! How many of you struggle with the holidays? How many of you have endless family gatherings where people bicker and argue the entire time? How many of you have family and friends you just don't want to see, but don't know how to get out of these get togethers? Let's talk about it.

Put Yourself First

What's the choice? To go or not to go. To be or not to be. (Just channeling my inner Shakespeare!) Can you handle this? Are you ready for what you know is coming?

Don't make choices because you think you have to. Don't make choices to avoid the argument that follows. Often what happens at the gathering is far worse than the argument that happens because you're not going.

You get to make choices for yourself. You don't have to make choices for anybody else. You can't control the choices of anybody else and they can't control your choices, regardless of what they might think or believe. You do what you do because that's what you've decided. That's it.

You see, the truth is you don't need to defend your choice. You just need to stand your ground. I know, you're trying to figure out what the difference is. The difference is how you respond to the questions when people ask why you're not going. Do you get mad? Do you get defensive? Or do you just offer the reason why you've decided not to go and leave it at that?

When you offer your reason for not going, place no blame. Take responsibility for your own choice. Grandma isn't the reason you're not going. If you blame her for it the fight starts, so don't blame her or anything else. By not blaming anything and simply taking responsibility for your choice and it removes the need to defend yourself.

Yes, they may still be offended anyway, but that's not on you. What you don't have control over is their response to your choice. So, you just do your part and leave the rest alone. You don't have to take on their pain or change your mind or convince them of anything. That's not your job.

Your role here is simply to stand in your choice and stay there, while allowing the people around you to do what they are going to do. This isn't easy. It never is. But the

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more you do it, the easier it will be and the more power you'll have to make new choices in the future.

You Have a Choice

This is the hard part because often we're not really asked if we're coming or not. It's just assumed. If we are asked, we don't feel like it's really a choice because saying no results in some kind of backlash. Not to mention, we don't want to hurt people's feelings. But let me remind you – you are not a martyr and you do not have to sacrifice yourself.

Your family is aware of the dynamics between you and that person. Regardless of what they might be thinking, what they say or don't say, whether they acknowledge it or not, they still have some awareness of the problem.

Are they really expecting you to put up with it for them? Yes, in some ways they are because what they say is that it's not that bad. They minimize it somewhat to protect themselves, but also in a roundabout way to try to protect you.

They keep hoping it'll get better. They are hoping you won't be too hurt. The truth is they don't want to leave either of you out. They don't want to uninvite anybody. They want both of you to come and they keep hoping you'll be able to work it out, whether that's a reasonable option or not.

The truth behind all this is that you can still make the choice not to go. Sometimes it's a choice of what's worse – the backlash of not coming or putting up with Grandma. Maybe that's not an easy choice. Maybe they are both bad. But it's still a choice. You can still decide what you're willing to deal with and what you're not.

Yes, I know, avoidance is a thing. You don't want to deal with any of it. But these sorts of life circumstances show up and we have to deal with them. Because we are in a position where we have to deal with it, we have to make sure that we do what's right for us.

At the very least, if you're going to find yourself in this kind of a position on a regular basis, knowing that you're able to make the choice you want to make helps make the process easier. When you're able to do the right thing for yourself, even though you still don't want to deal with it, you know you can deal with it. You don't end up victimizing yourself at the hands of other people. That's important. It allows you to retain your point of control in every circumstance and in this case, it's in your ability to choose.

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The Minimization Strategy

Let's shift our perception of people minimizing how we feel about the problem that they are aware of. What's actually happening?

The first part of the story is that they probably don't know how to deal with it. They can't tell Grandma off either and nobody wants to uninvite Grandma, so they are trying to find a way to get you to be okay with just dealing with it for a few hours, whether that's a good idea or not.

Could there be some denial there? Yes, sure. It's very possible there is denial there, but your job is not to get them to see it differently. Your job is not to convince them of anything. Leave them in their denial. Let them be there. Get okay with it.

I know it makes you feel very unseen, but I'm sure you can find other people that see you more clearly than your family does. This is where you have to separate the roles people play in your life.

Maybe you have a friend who's really good at fixing cars, but they can barely boil water and you know this. What do you go to this friend for? Do you ask them how to make a cheesecake or do you bring them your broken car to fix?

This friend plays a particular role, you're aware of what that is, you've accepted it, and you actually use it to your advantage. Guess what? The same is true with your family. They play a role in your life. It may not be the role you want them to play. It may not be the role you think you need them to play. It may not be the role society tells you they are supposed to play. But it is the role that they play in your life and that's as good as it's going to get.

You may never convince your car mechanic friend to learn to make cheesecake. Can you be okay with that? That's the same choice that you have to make with your family. Can you be okay with the role they have and stop wishing they would take on the role you want them to have?

One of the strategies that your family may be using is minimization. If we just don't make it a big deal, maybe they'll both come to the party. You want to make this a big deal. This is a massive problem in your head because the role you want your family to play is the one where they fully acknowledge how you feel, accept it, and offer you the choice to avoid Grandma. But they aren't going to do that. It's not because they are mean. It's not because they hate you. It's not because they are out to get you. It's because they just want you to come to the gathering and they don't really know how

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to handle Grandma either. They don't have a solution for you. When we don't know how to fix something, we just avoid it.

Remember your car mechanic friend? If you call that person and tell them your souffle fell, they are going to have a hard time relating to you. They aren't going to have a solution for you, and they probably aren't going to react the way you want them to. Why? Because that isn't their role in your life. They don't get it and they probably aren't going to get it. Can you be okay with that?

Your perception of the minimization is that your family is out to get you. You immediately want to defend yourself. It makes you mad and then you go to the gathering because you don't feel like you have a choice, and what happens? Grandma is her usual self, and nobody seems to hear what she says to you. That seems to validate the story you tell yourself about how they don't care about you and that they only bring you to the party to punish you.

The Story Isn't True

That's not a true story. People see pain and turn a blind eye to it because they don't know how to handle it or because it hurts them too. People see pain and turn a blind eye to it because they don't have a solution for it. They can't fix it. They can't make Grandma stop.

They use minimization hoping that you won't make it a big deal in your head and you won't be too hurt by Grandma doing what she does. You just see yourself as a victim of everybody in your family. Between the minimization and Grandma throwing her stuff everywhere, you feel completely alone and left out. Not to mention, you don't feel like you have a choice but to put up with all of it once or twice a year.

The story that you don't have a choice isn't true either. You always have a choice, you just don't always like the options. The option is to put up with the backlash of people being upset that you won't come. The fun part is that the ones that are most upset that you won't come are also the ones that minimize what happens between you and Grandma.

The story you tell yourself about how that plays out is what offers you the pain. Other people can only do what they can do. The car mechanic can't make cheesecake and you have to be okay with that. Your family can't do anything about Grandma and you have to be okay with that too. They want you at the party and yes, that's somewhat selfish knowing what they know, but the simple fact is they want you there and they want you to put the pain aside to do it. Yes, you can be okay with this as a simple reality too.

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What it comes down to is that they want to bake their cake and eat it too. They want both. They want the pain to stop and they want you to come. They do a crap job at making sure you know that. Because they do a crap job at it, you victimize yourself with it, you blame them for it, and you self-create a whole bunch of pain.

Self-Created Pain

The experience just is. Grandma does what Grandma does. We can't change it. We can't fix it. We can't make her stop. The family can't un-invite her because it's Grandma. We have this thing in society where we make family larger than life. So that means even when family is cruel, we tell ourselves we're supposed to put up with it. Guess what's happening? Your family is playing along with that societal message that says that we can't un-invite Grandma even though she's mean.

What are you doing with all this in your head? It plays out in front of you. It's really dramatic. You're the center of attention. It's easy to make up lots of great stories. What you're seeing is how people react to pain and how people react to dysfunctional family relationships. You're seeing societal beliefs play out and be encouraged. You're seeing people allow pain to be present because of those societal beliefs. You're seeing people be somewhat selfish in those beliefs.

The mind will take all this and turn into the best dramatic screenplay ever written because that's what the mind does. Your job is to separate yourself from the story your mind wants to tell.

Why do you need to separate yourself from that story? Because that story does nothing but offer you pain that you create for yourself. Grandma offers you some pain and she's kind of mean about it. Your job when you come into contact with her is to not take on the pain she throws around. It's not yours. It's not about you, even when she tries to make it about you. You don't have to pick it up. You don't have to be offended by it. You don't have to take it personally.

Is that easy? Nope. But that's part of the work to heal ourselves. We teach ourselves how to leave other people's pain alone – leave it where they throw it. Don't pick it up. Don't throw it back. Just try to find compassion for the pain that Grandma is clearly in.

The story you want to tell is that your family is in cahoots with Grandma. That's probably not the case. Your family just doesn't really know what else to do. Your job there is to recognize that and not make yourself a victim of what they aren't able to do.

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The story you tell yourself in your head is offering you more pain than the experience does. The story about why your family is doing what they are doing and the story about why Grandma hurls insults at you all night long is far more intense and painful than what's actually happening around you.

Yes, Grandma hurls insults but you can drop them, ignore them, and not worry about it. Yes, your family is a bit selfish in wanting you there knowing what Grandma does, but you could try to see that they just want you around and be okay with that. Or you can make up the story, create your own pain, and then get stuck in the choice about what to do.

Stuck in The Choice

Up until now I've focused on making the choice to go a valid option by trying to show you how to see it a bit differently to make it more manageable. If you stay out of your head, don't tell the stories that make you a victim of what's happening, then you can go and figure out how to not be so bothered by what's happening.

Going is a valid choice. Not going is a valid choice. The only thing that stops you from making that choice is you. Why are you stopping yourself from making that choice? The fear of what happens if.

You just don't like the options because they both feel like some sort of punishment, but again that's mostly self-created pain. You don't have control over other people. So, telling yourself a story that makes you a victim of your own lack of control causes you pain. Stop telling the story of what you wish others would do and start paying attention to what you have control over. Your point of control is in making a choice for yourself, even when you don't like the options.

Is it possible there is a middle ground? Maybe you'll only go for an hour. Maybe you can intentionally go late after Grandma goes home. Maybe there will be enough people there that you can more or less avoid Grandma. Maybe there are ways to take some control that you haven't thought of yet. Maybe there are other options that you're not considering because you're stuck in the pain of making a choice you'd rather not make.

Truthfully there are more than two options. You can go late or leave early. You can bring something or someone that will distract Grandma so that she doesn't think about insulting you. You can come up with a strategy before you get there that allows you to deal with her better than you normally do. Remember your point of control is not just in your choice to go or not go, it's in how you respond and react to what's happening. How do you react to her? Does that work for you? If not, what are some

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other ways you could respond to her that may change how she acts, at least temporarily? One of the ways you can break the cycle is by managing your own reactions. What would that look like?

Manage Yourself Not the Experience

We know we can't control Grandma. We can't control other family members either. The only thing we have control over is ourselves. That means we have to stand back from the pain and actually look at all the options that are within our control and pick the ones that work the best for us.

If you decide not to go, how do you react to the disappointment or the backlash that comes from making that choice?

If you decide to go, how do you handle Grandma? What can you do differently?

Is going late an option?

Is leaving early an option? Don't make up stories about getting stuck there. If you want to leave you can leave when you are ready. That people-pleasing thing you do when you stick around somewhat against your will, is because you're telling yourself a story. You're back to trying to make other people happy and sacrificing yourself in the process. It's okay to just leave, even if they offer you a drink or more food. You're allowed to go home when you want to.

Again, you have the power of choice, even when they try to take it away from you. You can't control other people, so these kinds of things are probably going to happen anyway. Your control is in how you respond or react to them when they do happen. You don't have to get stuck in the choice and you don't have to invalidate choices because you don't think you have control over it.

You're always working to manage yourself within the experience. You have to constantly accept that you can't control the experience. We spend a lot of time in our lives fighting to control the experience. Guess what? It doesn't work. You can't. So, when you're faced with choices you don't want to make, you have to figure out what the best way to manage yourself is, not what the best way to manage the experience is.

What's the difference?

Trying to manage the experience puts control outside of you. It makes you try to manage other people, which you can't do.

When you figure out how to manage yourself within the experience you don't have control over, you keep your point of control within you. It allows you to make

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choices for yourself not based on what other people are doing or not doing. This allows you to make the choice you actually want to make, not the choice you think you need to make. It frees up all the options.

You make yourself feel powerless because of where you try to place your point of control. The minute you try to put your point of control outside of you in something you can't control, it will make you feel powerless. The sense of powerlessness is self-created. The pain is self-created. It's just a story you end up telling, mostly because you don't like the choices you think you have.

Trapped In the Choice

The feeling of being trapped in a choice makes you tell the story of powerlessness and wish you had control over things you don't. That's where the struggle lives. It's the perception of needing control over things you can't have control over. Here's the hard part – it's the perception that's mixed up, not the reality.

The reality just is. The thing is going to happen or has already happened. It can't be changed. There is nothing to be done. Your job is not to fix the outside world, it's just to accept reality as what it is and trust yourself to handle what happens next. That's not easy is it?

We desperately want to fix our realities. The desire to fix our reality is actually what creates the feeling of powerlessness or helplessness. You think you're supposed to fix it. You think you need to do something. That perception, that idea, is the thing that gets you into trouble. It's what causes you pain.

Is the goal to stop wanting to change what's happening around us? Not necessarily. The goal is just to get okay with what is long enough to find your point of control, make some new choices, and begin to work towards changing your reality where possible.

You can't change Grandma. This is how she shows up in the world. She's unlikely to change that. She's probably not going to start treating you better no matter what you do. But you can make sure that your reaction to her doesn't encourage her further. Don't give her any ammunition. Sure, she may still find a reason to insult you, but you don't have to hand it to her on a silver platter. Make her work for it a little. That's something you have control over.

A shift in the dynamic may actually change her in some unexpected way. It may encourage others to interfere a bit to try to encourage her to back off. You may get

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something very unexpected out of it, but you'll never know until you attempt to change the dynamic.

Can she drag you back in? Of course. She probably knows all the buttons. Here's the thing – they are your buttons, meaning that if she triggers you, you can control that. You don't have to let her trigger you no matter what she does. You can keep a grip on those triggers by learning to manage yourself within the experience even while triggered.

Your point of control is within you. It's not in other people. It's definitely not in Grandma. You can't control Grandma, but you don't have to. You can feel better without changing Grandma at all because you can learn to manage yourself.

You feel trapped in the choice to go to the party because you don't have control over it. You can't control who shows up. You definitely can't control Grandma. You can't control what's going to happen. You can't control the backlash if you tell people you aren't going. The whole thing makes you feel completely powerless, but you aren't, you just think you are because you don't have control over the things you want control over.

Wishing Your Power Away

That's how you wish your power away. You wish your power were somewhere else. You wish you had more control. You wish you had more options. You wish you knew what to do.

It's time to stop wishing and look for your point of control instead. You aren't trapped in the choice. You can go or not. You can learn to deal with Grandma or not. You can manage yourself and your triggers or not. You can look for your point of control or not. You can be okay or not. You can wish your power away or not. It's all a choice. Everything is a choice. What are you choosing?

It's Not Supposed to Be Like This

Sometimes wishing your power was somewhere else makes you feel like the experience isn't supposed to be happening. It makes you tell stories about what should be happening instead.

The thing is – reality just is. It's not something we can wish away. It's just an experience you're having. It's temporary. It comes and goes. Sure, it may repeat itself a few times a year but it starts and stops every time. Wishing the experience away doesn't make the experience easier. It likely makes it more painful for you.

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The minute you decide it's not supposed to be like this, you create a new level of pain for yourself. It begins to create a story of being punished or a story of what you think you deserve or don't deserve. It starts to tell a story of lack of worthiness. These stories aren't true, regardless of what your experience is. So, if you go down the rabbit hole of trying to wish your experience away, you're going to find the experience is infinitely more painful than it would be if you just let it be there.

Wishing your experience away will make you feel more trapped than you already feel. You're not trapped, you can do whatever you want, but that trapped feeling isn't going to be helped by wishing away the experience.

Acceptance

This means we have to work to find acceptance. We need to accept what is. We need to accept the imperfect reality we are dealing with. We need to be okay with the choices we have and make the best choices we can given the options we have available to us. We do our best to honor ourselves within the experience with every choice we make.

Is it going to be perfect? No. Will every choice be the right choice when we look back on it? No. Is that okay? Yes. Because that's how we learn. That's how we begin to understand our experience and how we affect our own experience.

The Impact You Have on Your Own Life

Most people don't consider this – how much they impact their own life. Everything you say or do out in the world has an impact. There is a cause and effect attached to it. That means when you see cycles happening around you that you don't like, your job is to understand how you're impacting that.

Now, we don't do this in a way that we end up blaming ourselves for what other people are doing. We do this in a way that allows us to question how we can shift our own behavior as a way of potentially changing what happens.

If you always engage in an argument with Grandma when she's mean because you're defending yourself, maybe stop that and see what happens. What does Grandma do differently when you react differently to her?

Noticing what happens when you change what you do allows you to recognize your own impact on the situation. The minute you understand your own effect, you have the ability to make a different choice and create a different outcome. That's where your power is.

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Grandma may be so surprised that you didn't argue back, that she completely changes the topic or ignores you for the rest of the night. You may wonder what's happening, but the truth is that when you break a cycle like that, it catches other people off guard. They suddenly have to decide what to do. They can't just fall back into the old routine anymore.

Your job is not to be bothered by the strange reaction from Grandma when you change your own behavior. She's probably not going to know what to do and that's okay. Leave her to that. You don't have to fix it. You don't have to apologize. You don't have to do anything. Just leave her in that space of questioning things.

Saying No

It's possible that if you say no to the holiday party, that it breaks a cycle. Your family may not know what to think. Sometimes it's that not knowing what to think that precipitates the backlash. They get concerned about what's happening, but instead of actually being concerned they show up as angry.

The key is to recognize what's happening and then manage your own behavior within that. Okay, you broke the cycle. You said no. Now what? If you just allow yourself to descend into chaos, you're creating a new cycle. You're not going to like that cycle. That's not going to be a good time. So now you have to be able to manage yourself so that other people can't trigger you and drag you back in. If you let them convince you to come to the party, you haven't fixed anything. You have to be able to stand in your choice and stay there. That can be the hard part.

Maintaining Your Choice

Okay, so you made a choice. You decided not to go and now you're dealing with whatever the reaction is from your family. How do you stay in your choice? How do you defend your choice without defending yourself?

Defending yourself is the lashing back that happens when people insult you. If the backlash to your choice is to tell you about all the crappy decisions they think you made in the past, then defending yourself looks like arguing about all those choices. By the way, that's a useless argument that doesn't solve anything. All they are trying to do here is make you question your choice, so you'll come to the party. You don't have to engage in this at all.

When you make a choice and stand your ground, it looks like not defending yourself. You state what you're doing and why, without any blame, and that's it. The key is not to blame others for your choice. Take responsibility for your choice. You

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made the choice because you don't want to go. That's the story. Don't blame Grandma because the minute you do that, you're engaging in the fight. Now you're giving other people a reason to defend Grandma. They start defending the pain and that's not helpful. So don't offer the story of blame. Stay in your choice without making up stories about why you're making the choice.

Can you still be honest? Yes. I don't feel comfortable at these parties. I'd prefer to be at home. I'd prefer to be doing something else. You can be honest about your uncomfortability with being at the party without blaming anybody else for that uncomfortability. Take everything surrounding the choice on yourself. Don't project it out at all.

Why is that important? First it removes a lot of ammunition. If you're not projecting any blame onto anybody else, they have nothing to defend. That's huge. Second, it allows you to own your choices. This is one of the keys to taking your power back or feeling like you have the power to make choices in the first place.

Sometimes one of the reasons why we don't like making choices is because we don't like taking responsibility for them. But in order to take your power back you have to be willing to own your choices. You can't avoid this part and stand in your power successfully.

The decision not to go to the party offers you an opportunity to learn to do this for yourself. By the way, this may be the reason why you continually go to the party. It's not the backlash from other people you're worried about although that maybe what you tell yourself, you're simply avoiding taking responsibility for your own choices.

Taking Responsibility for The Choice

This is something I struggled with. I had to start making smaller choices and then learn how to own them. I had to recognize the stories of blame that I was telling and figure out how to just state what I wanted without defending anything or blaming anyone.

It took a bit of work to understand what I was doing. But eventually I got enough clarity that I was able to hold my own in my choices without a problem. Here's the deal – I had to actually do it. I couldn't just talk about it. I couldn't just sit on the couch and dream about it. I had to actually try it and then watch what happened. The same will be true for you.

Doing this is going to give you confidence. It's going to give you the confidence to make your own choices and it's going to give you the confidence that other people

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will allow you to make your own choices. When you stand in it and you don't blame others for it, they will respect it eventually. They may not like it but they will deal with it.

Why does that happen? Because they realize suddenly that they can't mess with you anymore. The dysfunction that was created by the pain that you were in is suddenly gone. There's nothing to mess with anymore, so they stop. Sometimes that takes a while. Sometimes the relationship ends before that happens, particularly when people are only there for the dysfunction. Sometimes you just have to walk away because they aren't going to move in the direction you've gone.

Respect Others' Choices

You're asking people to respect your choices when you make them and you're shifting your behavior to give the people around you a path to being able to respect those choices. That means that you have to respect the choices of others when they don't change, lash back, or otherwise do what they do. Not changing is a choice. Ending the relationship is a choice. Respect those choices when you see them. Don't do the things you're indirectly trying to get other people to stop doing.

Pay attention to your own behavior. Pay attention to your own reactions to other people's choices. How are you doing the same things you don't like in other people? This matters. If you want people to respect your choices, then walk your talk and respect theirs, even and especially when you don't like the choice.

Be More Self-Aware

To fully break a cycle like this and keep it broken, you have to be aware of how you're still in the cycle you're trying to break. Where do you mirror the behaviors you don't like in other people? How are you doing to other people what you don't like being done to you? Where are you questioning other people's choices?

This stuff isn't easy. There's a lot of self-awareness you have to have to find all these things. It's not going to happen overnight. It takes time to find all these bits and deal with them. But the trick is, you have to be willing to try. You have to be willing to become more self-aware. Pay attention to your own behavior. Pay attention to the impact you're having on your own reality. That's your point of control! That's where your power lies.

If I know that my behavior is impacting my reality then I can change my behavior. Guess what that does? Gives me some indirect control over my reality. I can't directly control it most of the time, but I can indirectly control it through my behavior.

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What's the difference between that and manipulation? Intention. Is your intention malicious? Are you intending to cause harm? Probably not. You recognize your own impact on a situation and you're managing yourself to hopefully shift the impact you have on a situation in a positive way.

We can't equate consciously choosing a response to manipulation. If we do that, we're just defending the pain of unconsciously reacting to everything that goes on around us. Choosing to consciously respond to something allows us to manage our own pain and not project that onto other people. It allows us to make conscious choices about what to do next. It allows us to consciously decide to be compassionate or caring instead of defensive and mean. It offers us a simpler path forward. It gives us access to the innate power we have access to all the time. We're in charge of how we react or respond to everything that goes on around us. That is your point of control in every situation.

To use it effectively you have to be self-aware, and you have to be willing to own the choices that you make. If you make a crappy choice, you own that too. Take responsibility for the crappy choices by having conversations with people after the fact and apologizing when necessary. Don't beat yourself up. Learn about yourself and the impact you're having. Those are very useful moments to learn about how you are impacting your own experience. It will show you the cycles very clearly and then you'll be able to break them.

Final Thoughts

The truth is that it all works together. The sense of powerlessness comes from the perception of an inability to affect the things that are happening around you. What that doesn't offer you is the idea that your ability to affect what's happening around you comes through how you respond or react to those things. It doesn't come through external control. It comes through internal control and self-awareness.

When I talk about managing yourself within the experience, this is what it's about. Your sense of powerlessness doesn't let you change your behavior because you think it'll be ineffective. You don't think it's you. You don't even realize your own power. You don't see the power that you have because you keep looking for it outside of yourself. You spend time telling the stories of blame, shame, guilt, and victimization.

How do I know that? Because I lived it. That was my reality. It didn't work for me either. I had to learn to stand in my power and stay there. I had to make my own choices, own them, and then see how I was feeding into the cycles I was trying to break through my own behavior. I had to become self-aware – not in that

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uncomfortable kind of a way – but in a healthy way that allowed me to start to manage myself within the experience. It gave me indirect control. It showed me power I didn't know I had. It offered me freedom to make choices and do things I thought I'd never be able to do.

You can get there too. Hopefully this little booklet helps you get started.

Love to all.

Della

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